

“Christ almighty,” Johnson said, wiping the sweat from his forehead. “What the hell did you do!”

Vince glared at his hands in pure disbelief. He couldn’t pull his eyes away. He hoped that the longer he stared at them, it would just vanish. It didn’t. The crimson liquid slid into every small crease of his hands, highlighting every feature of years of hard labor. Little by little it dripped onto the pearly white rug on which he was sitting.

His hands began to tremble as reality sat in. His heart began to furiously beat in his chest, the side of his neck thumped in unison. His breathing grew faster and faster until the tears began to form in the corners of his eyes. An attempt to drag his hands across the rug to wipe away what he had done only smeared the fabric with long streaks of red. His sight fixed on those two long streaks mirrored each other at his knees. The little contents of his stomach rose into his throat and erupted on the pristine hardwood floor to the side.

“Fucking hell, Vince. How did you up and let this happen?” Johnson demanded. “You’re better than this...”

Vince’s wide eyes raised to meet his accomplice. “Dude, I didn’t do this.”

“You have blood on your hands and clothes, you fucking psycho!”

He tried to pull the last few minutes together. He didn’t hurt anyone. He could never hurt anyone. He was just someone looking to make a quick buck off of somebody unfortunately not locking their door at night, but what he had stumbled into, or rather on, was something he wanted no part of. Now he was part of it, and the evidence was all over him.

Vince was a part of a small gang of thieves that eyed the finer side of town. Every night he and his fellow nightcrawler, Johnson, would go from door to door, window to window, looking for an easy way into any house on the north end over 2,500 square feet. Those were statistically more likely to have higher-priced items to acquire but lower-tiered home security systems. It was easy money for them, especially with it being so close to Christmas, and the houses they would hit would be chock full of assets to sell.

Their system was perfect. Johnson had it down to a science. After they would hit a quick lick, they would deposit the merchandise at several different safe spots around the city for the assets to cool off. For the really hot merchandise, they would have to take it beyond state lines to even have a hope of turning a profit. The extra travel, and the risk of transporting such goods, brought the projected revenue down, but when you work in a business where the investment had a sweet five-finger discount, profits were almost a guarantee.

This particular job had been on their radar for quite some time. It took Johnson and Vince only a few weeks to really nail down the owner's schedule before planning to make a move. They were quite predictable. Leave the house at 8:00 AM, then come home no later than 5:15 every single night. They seemed like normal people with a normal routine, with the exception of Friday nights. Their pattern was so boring that Johnson nearly ducked down in his seat when he saw them leaving while on a stake out. It was Friday, the best opportunity they had to do this quick and clean.

Vince was the one to make the call. While out staking another potential job, Vince sent a text confirming he had driven by the house and noticed the couple's car was gone for the evening, just as predicted. This was it. This was the best night to make a move on the job if there would ever be one. This night was different though.

Vince looked back down at his stained hands and then back to Johnson examining the mangled mess littering the living room floor. There was a pit in his stomach at the thought that his partner would even think this was something he was capable of. He wasn't capable of much confrontation, let alone hurting someone. That's why he was a thief and not a mugger. He operated within the safety blanket of the shadows. It was where he had been more comfortable than anywhere else in his life.

"We're supposed to be clean in and clean out!" Johnson scolded. "Attention like this will only shine a spotlight on us. On our operation. That's something we can't have!"

"Johnson, dude please, listen to me. *I did not do this!*"

"So, you're telling me that this nice married couple just magically had their throats cut from behind by flying elves like in those stupid fucking books you read?"

Vince shook his head. "I don't know what happened."

"Well, you better figure it out, because we're up shit's creek without a paddle." Johnson wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Christ, we're gonna have to move operations again."

"Dude, please," Vince pleaded. "I swear to God I didn't touch anybody!"

"Then why are you covered in these people's blood, hm?"

He took a moment to collect himself before explaining. "After we broke in, it was pitch black. I couldn't see even an inch in front of me. I kicked something in the dark, and when I tried to step over it I slipped on the-" Vince tried to control his trembling voice, but it was no use. "*Blood.*"

Johnson stared at the young man for a moment before taking one last look at the horrifying scene before him. He knew this kid wasn't capable of such a gruesome act, at least not based on what he'd observed of him. Even if he was backed into a corner, he would more quickly throw up his arms in surrender than put his hands on anyone. He'd been around long enough to gain his trust, so he didn't have any reason to believe that this time was any different.

He sighed. "Alright, look. We have to bleach this place."

"Bleach? There's blood literally everywhere!"

"Not to clean up, dumbass," he said, grabbing his partner's hands and turning them palms up. "We need to erase our own fingerprints and DNA from this house. It's gonna be like we were never here."

A small smile popped in the corner of Vince's mouth. "Thanks for believing me. I was starting to panic for real."

A creek echoed from behind them making the two intruders freeze. "Oh my God! Mom! Dad!"

They quickly turned to see a boy standing in the doorway of the living room with eyes wider than a deer seeing the bright lights speeding to their untimely end. They didn't say a word. Johnson was sure they scouted this house perfectly, and there was no sign of the couple having a kid. That didn't matter now. He knew that there was no chance to explain the situation to him, because all he saw now was the pair of men that murdered his parents. Johnson was no killer, but he sure as hell wasn't going to jail tonight.

"Hey, kid. I promise this isn't what it looks like."

The boy stepped back a few feet into the hallway. "Then what's going on?"

"We *did* break in to steal, that I'll admit, but I swear we just found your parents like this." Johnson explained, raising his hands into the air to seem as less threatening as he possibly could.

"Look, no matter what, someone killed your parents, and I don't wanna be here when he gets back." Vince jumped to his feet. Johnson didn't even take that into consideration. They may have found the corpses, but the person who made them that way could still be in the area. The person could still be in the house.

"How do I know you didn't kill them?" The boy asked.

Johnson struggled to find a good answer. "I guess, well, I guess you're gonna have to just trust us."

"Trust a couple of scary old men who are breaking into my house?"

The kid had a point. They were running out of options. If they left now, he would surely turn them in with a description and prints to match. However, Johnson knew that there was another option. An option that under normal circumstances would be completely out of his arsenal, but this was clearly not under a realm of normal conditions.

"Vince," Johnson said without taking his eyes on the boy. "We're gonna have to take the kid."

Vince glared at him in disbelief. "I'm sorry, what the hell are you talking about?"

"If we let him go we're done for. We're gonna have to take him to the old factory safe house until we can think of something to do with him."

"No way, man. We're thieves, not friggin' kidnappers! If we take him, every cop in the state is going to be looking for us!" Vince argued.

Johnson turned quickly to meet his gaze. "In case you haven't noticed, we're probably already heading down that road right now!"

"So, we're just gonna take the kid, assuming he comes with us willingly, and stash him at one of the gang's safe houses? What do you think they're gonna think when they find him?"

"I don't know." He muttered, shaking his head.

The unsettling silence led way to another grim turn - the boy was gone. They exchanged glances in a panic, then Johnson nodded into the direction of the hallway. The two quietly stepped around the remains of the kid's parents to silently give chase. The creaking of the hardwood under their feet ceased as the soft fabric of the carpet found its way under their feet. Johnson held a finger to his lips and motioned for Vince to stay in the living room just in case the kid tried to make a stealthy escape. He nodded quickly and turned to keep watch as best as his rattled nerves would let him.

The dark hallway stretched before Johnson. He waited just a moment for his eyes to adjust, then slowly began to creep his way down the hall. Two closed doors lined the right wall with an open door at the end to reveal a bathroom. On the left wall, only one door stood open

with the orange glow of a street light from outside shining through into the hallway. Johnson could make a safe bet that that had to be the kid's room.

He came to the door frame and slowly poked his head around the corner to reveal the messy life of a young boy strung all over the floor. He listened for a moment, but nothing came. He stepped inside, glancing around for any small place he could hide. The bed in the corner of the room would be the obvious choice, but his gut feeling told him that there was probably enough junk under there to fill a pick-up truck. By the window was a door slightly ajar. By Johnson's estimate, it was just enough room for small fingers to pull the door shut from the inside.

"Listen, kid, if you just come with us until we can sort this all out, I promise we won't lay a finger on you. We'll get you some bagel bites, and all the soda you can drink. We just need to make sure you aren't going to tell anyone something that isn't true," Johnson called out toward the closet.

As expected, no response came. He cautiously approached the closet door and grabbed the handle. He waited a moment to listen for the boy's quickening breathing, but still nothing. He aggressively pulled the door open, slamming it into the dresser against the nearby wall. The closet was empty. Only clothes littered the floor and the occasional toy was all that was within. He turned to look around the boy's room and quickly convinced himself that it was empty. He stepped back into the hall and hurriedly made his way into the open bathroom.

He didn't really care about the pounding his boots made on the floor anymore. This kid was really starting to piss him off with this game of hide and seek. Each second that passed by increased their chances of getting caught up in this mess and earn a double homicide slapped on their heads. He rushed the bathroom and stopped just short of the shower. The navy blue shower curtain was closed, which really sold the idea of the nautical theme the deceased owners were shooting for. He listened closely for the sound of movement around him, but the only thing he could hear was the furnace kicking on to warm up the house from the chilly night.

Johnson slowly reached his hand into the opening of the curtain and prepared himself for the boy to make a run for it. He was going to keep his promise. No one else was getting hurt tonight, especially the only person that could deliver them a case-saving alibi. In one swift motion he pulled the curtain to the side. It was empty. He let out a deep sigh of frustration and yanked the curtain back closed.

"Vince, let's spread out. I can't find him." Johnson called out. There was no reply. He stepped back into the hallway finding Vince's silhouette still in the doorway keeping watch. "Hey, Vince, let's spread out. We'll cover more ground and get this kid before we're toast."

Vince didn't answer. His dark silhouette just stood stiff as a board in the doorway of the living room. The ensnaring darkness made it impossible for Johnson to make out any features on him. It was like his partner had been replaced by a shade for the crimes he committed. Johnson began to silently pray that it wasn't for the eternal crime he was thinking it was.

"Hey, quit messing around, man. You went deaf on me?" Johnson challenged.

The silhouette began to sway slightly before collapsing to the floor. Johnson let out a sharp gasp. Behind was a much smaller silhouette. He traced the outline of the boy's figure down to his right hand that had a slightly longer length than the left. He slowly backed into the little light in the living room to reveal a long kitchen knife covered in the crimson blood of his partner. The boy turned slightly and tossed the knife on the remains of his parents. His dark eyes quickly darted back to Johnson who was still attempting to process what he had just witnessed.

"Jesus Christ almighty! What the hell did you do!" Johnson cried out.

"Whoops," the boy shrugged. "There's another one. Sorry, Mom."

"You killed Vince!"

The boy shrugged again. "Yeah. Guess so."

Johnson shook his head in disbelief. His instincts were pulling at him to make some sort of mad dash out of a nearby window, but his body was frozen. He had never witnessed someone die in front of him before. Never had he witnessed a murder before. Never could he imagine a murder taking place in front of him by the hands of a child.

"This is a joke. Vince, get up, you fucking loser."

"Nah," the boy shrugged. "Pretty sure he's dead. I had to saw through his neck 'cause I'm not strong enough yet for a clean cut."

"Jesus Christ, what the hell are you?"

The boy sat down on the floor, and crossed his legs. "I don't know. Mom always said I was unique after she caught me stabbing that girl from down the street. She even went so far as to burn the body to protect me." He glanced over to her body. "I guess she was an okay mom."

Johnson's eyes burned from several minutes of not blinking. "Why did you kill your mom?"

“She told me she was gonna send me to a special home to get help. I really don’t wanna leave home.”

“What about your dad?”

The boy looked down at the corpse of his father. “He was just a jerk. He called me mean things, like a monster and devil-possessed.”

It took everything in him to not agree with the dead man, but he knew if he said something along those lines, he would more than likely end up like the kid’s unfortunate dad. He needed to get out by any means necessary. It finally came to him, like the burning of a small candle in the darkest of nights. He was going to have to get past this boy one way or another, and he was damn sure not going to end up like Vince. His road wasn’t going to end in a body bag or jail tonight.

Johnson slowly began to inch his way toward him. He sat like a statue keeping watch over the corpses of his fallen victims, but his eyes almost glowed in the low light of the lamp in the corner of the living room. He began to wonder if he could do what was necessary to get out of this house. Could he actually hurt this boy? No. This wasn’t a boy. What sat before him was a complete monster. Something that putting down would be more of a benefit to society than even wasting the time to try and help.

The trail of Vince’s blood slowly curved its way down the unlevelled floor of the hallway, eventually running into the wall where it seeped into the crack. Johnson winced as the sounds of the blood splotted under each step he took, but he wasn’t going to take his eyes off the boy even for a moment. He began to wrap his mind around what he was going to do when he got his hands on him, formulating a plan to not only get out of this nightmare, but avenge his partner.

He wasn’t worried about being hit with these crimes anymore. He had friends that could make him disappear without a trace. They were good. The best part about being a thief is that the shadows are your friend. It welcomes you in to hide you away from whatever trouble you might find yourself in, and the shadows were everywhere. He knew he would have to restart somewhere else again, but he had already accepted that. Now, he was about to end the life of this monster before it had a chance to get out into the world. The best way to stop a fire is to prevent it from spreading. Tonight ended the spread of this young killer.

The boy suddenly smirked. Just as he reached the boy, the front door burst open with two armed men in uniform standing with their weapons fixed on Johnson. The boy’s demeanor

flipped like a coin. He started wailing hysterically and ran towards the police officers. The one in the front put his arm around the boy, then noticed the three bodies that lined the floor.

“Don’t you move an inch!” He commanded.

Johnson threw up his hands. “No, no! The damn kid killed them!”

He felt a sting hit his stomach and suddenly found himself completely unable to move. His body seized and he collapsed onto the bloody floor. The involuntary spasms continued until the officer released the trigger, which allowed the other to dive on top of him and clasped his hands together with the metal handcuffs. It was over. His life was over for something he never did, or ever could possibly imagine doing. They hoisted him up and led him outside. Johnson looked over his shoulder one last time to see the boy and his crooked smile.